DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 326 RC 022 158

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TITLE	Praxis to Practice: Putting Qualitative Methods To Work for Rural Education.
PUB DATE	1999-05-00
NOTE	11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Qualitative Research in Rural Education Conference (1st, Morgantown, WV, May 20-21, 1999).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Accountability; *Action Research; *Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethics; Higher Education; Objectivity; *Qualitative Research; Rural Education; *Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	*Research Ethics; Researcher Subject Relationship

ABSTRACT

This paper examines issues and areas of concern for the educational researcher moving from the relative safety of academic research to the more perilous arena of practice-oriented or action-oriented qualitative research. The first question is one of purity or objectivity: giving credibility to research results by imposing adequate rigor on methods and interpretation to offset the agenda of a financial supporter or to balance the researcher's own perspective or ambitions. The second question regards the ethics of research. The action researcher has no more license to harm than does the academic researcher. It is argued that the applied or action researcher must have higher standards of ethics as the research subjects will not be anonymous and their lives or careers could be negatively affected. Next is the question of power--the aura around "research" that elevates the researcher over his or her subjects, as well as the power of the qualitative research process to distort the researcher's perspective and judgment. Finally, there are the double questions of applicability and accountability. The action researcher must face not only the prospect of sharing research findings but also of seeing those findings tested and applied. Seven questions are posed to researchers concerning how to put qualitative methods to work for rural education. A table compares 10 aspects of academic, pedagogical, and applied/action research. (SV)

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Praxis to Practice:

Puttting Qualitative Methods to Work for Rural Education

"Practice needs theory and theory needs practice just like fish needs clean water."

Freire:1996, 107

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A paper presentted at the First Annual Qualitative Research in Rural Education Conference, May 20th and 21st, 1999, West Virginia University, Morgantown. This paper is a "work in progress and, therefore, not ready for publication. Please contact me if you would like to cite any part of it. I invite your comments and suggestions.

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Praxis to Practice

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Praxis is defined as "exercise or practicing of an art, science or skill; usual or conventional conduct: habit, custom, but comes from the Greek *prassein*, to pass through, experience or practice" (Oxford, 1782). Practice means to "engage regularly in, or "to follow, (as in art, profession or trade), as a way of life (Oxford, 1780). Although I titled this paper because the juxtaposition of the words amused me, *praxis* does lead to practice, though it is not perhaps the expected evolution. As I make the transition from academic research to research that will lead to action or change of some sort, I have asked myself what I need to do, what I need to think about, in order for the new form my research takes to be as reliable as the work I did in an academic setting. I am not allowing myself to ask if that research had any reliability.

In their text on qualitative research Bogdan and Biklen distinguish three phases of applied qualitative research: "*evaluation and policy research,"* in which the researcher "describe[s] and assess[es] a particular program in order to improve or eliminate it...."*pedagogical research* [in which] the investigator is often a practitioner (a teacher, an administrator, or educational specialist) or someone close to practice who wants to use the qualitative approach to do what he or she does better." And, "*action research,"* in which "persons conducting the research

act as citizens attempting to influence the political process through collecting information. The goal is to promote social change that is consistent with the advocates' beliefs " (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992: 201).

If we accept the distinction between basis research and these three types of action research, what do we have to consider as we move from one to the other or engage in all three simultaneously? I think the issue of who we are as researchers is paramount. The various forms qualitative research takes are more varied than those of quantitative research because the researcher is him or herself such an important variable. What I report might be different than what you report not only because we have collected data from different people at different times and locations, but also because we are ourselves different vessels. Even if we could control for variables in the research we would invariably see the same data somewhat differently, and most amazingly we might both be right because the whole is too complex for one researcher to comprehend. Like blind men touching the elephant, we would each report a piece of the whole and in the summing of the different parts come to a fuller understanding of the phenomena we had observed.

What should we consider as we make the transition from the relative safety of research conducted in the ivied tower of academia to research conducted on the perilous slope of practice? I include in this category research oriented to action, what some people have called applied research, but not only action research which we have come to think of as related to teacher's reflection on their own practice.

But frankly, I have nothing except questions to offer. As I consider the relative rigor of my own academic research, conducted within constraints of time, money, and certainly my own limitations, I think about ways in which the research I am involved in now is different. Though still constrained by limited time and money and by my own prejudices, sloth, and ineptitude, additional concerns burden this research.

First is the question of purity or objectivity. Can research commissioned by an entity that has a goal, an agenda, a plan it wants to implement, and which is paying the bill, ever produce results that are "pure," and wholly believable? What must the researcher do in order to impose adequate rigor on the method, the data, the analysis and the interpretation? Or is research conducted for social action or change really any different than basic research as the researcher always has a perspective and agenda, even if it is just his or her own career, potential glory and fame. As H. Russell Bernard reminds us in his text on Research Methods in Anthropology, "Don't hide from the fact that you are interested in your own glory, your own career, your own achievement." (Bernard, 199 :109).

A second question regards the ethics of the research. Are the design, the hypothesis, the methods, and the goals ethical? Does the researcher have any more license to harm in action research or action oriented researcher than the academic researcher. The answer is obviously no. The research done in another time or place may now confound our sense of ethics but we must always

be vigilant that our own sense ethics is not equally contextualized but has some defining parameters that are clear enough to stand the tests of time and place.

I would argue that the applied or action researcher must have higher standards of ethics as the research subjects will not be anonymous – in fact in applied research the goal is to identify the good guys and the bad guys to destroy corporate and individual anonymity that has shielded unethical practice. But in exposing corrupt or ineffective policies we may also be exposing corrupt and ineffective people – destroying their careers, affecting their lives in very negative ways. This does not mean we are wrong to do so, but we have only to think of Senator Joseph McCarthy's hearings to find examples of lives and careers destroyed carelessly, which is to say, without care.

Which leads us to the question of power. The researcher shuffling through dusty documents in a library sanctum may not think of him or herself as powerful, but s/he is – and so is the aura around "research." This operates on many levels – the researcher becomes glorified to his or her subjects and to himself. The dominance of research over teaching in colleges and university's is testimony to this power. Research has managed to keep the Vandals at bay behind walls of words constructed, much like any slang, to identify those who are within the group and most importantly, those who are beyond the pale. We seem to think sometimes that if we can talk the talk we can define where we choose to walk, and lock the gate on others we don't want accompanying us or watching what we do.

But there is another way in which power corrupts – it can corrupt the basic researcher, the pedagogical researcher and the researcher who is working to expose corruption and ineffective or discriminatory policy. He or she can lose perspective or be co-opted by the people s/he is researching. The methods of qualitative research are human – which is why many of us are drawn to social science – it is a science and it is social. It involves talking with people, interviewing them, listening to them, watching them, getting close to them. And therein lies the problem; we are close to our subjects and if we are reasonable people we will probably find there is something redeeming and even lovable in the most reprehensible villain. Our perspective can be distorted by the process of our research itself. It is hard to be objective about one's own - whether they are our children, our students or our research subjects.

Then there are the double questions of applicability and accountability. If our work is any good, someone is going to try to apply it in the field. In basic research this would involve a replication of our findings, in action or applied research this is the "Oh no! You mean they actually are going to use this stuff?" problem. Earlier ethnographers such as Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski did not have to worry about this issue! In fact, in helping establish the time-honored if not necessarily honorable practice in ethnography of staying off another researcher's turf, they didn't even have to worry (at least until after they were dead) that anyone else would question the validity of their findings by re-examining the Trobrianders or other conveniently distant groups they had staked out as their own. The pedagogical researcher, as long as s/he is working

on his or her own practice at least does not have to share embarrassing findings and outcomes, the action oriented researcher has to face not only the prospect of sharing her or his work but of seeing findings and hypotheses tested.

What does this all mean? As someone just leaving the nest of academic research to fly into the untested air of action oriented research should I reconsider? Does action or applied research have validity? Do the outcomes benefit people? My answer is an emphatic yes. I think about the housewives who unearthed (literally) the problems at Love Canal, the people in East St, Louis who have identified community problems and developed community solutions, the people Paulo Freire worked with in the slums of Brazil, and countless others who have done credible, well-planned and carefully carried out research which has resulted in public good. I say, Right On. Write on.

Now to the second part of the title of this collection of thoughts: how can we put qualitative methods to work for rural education. What I would like to do it throw out a few questions and see where our discussion leads us.

1) What questions, concerns, challenges, issues, etc. need to be researched?

2) What do we know and what don't we know about rural education?

3) What is particular to rural education and culture?

4) Is there anything we can learn about rural education that would be useful elsewhere?

5) What else must we consider?

6) What methods or types of qualitative research lend themselves to this work?

7) What cautions should we consider?

QUALLITATIVE RESEARCH:A comparison of types

	Acaddemic Research Ethnoography	Pedagogical Research	Applied/Action Research
Subject Matter	educaational process culturre, context, policy	teacher practice	school + community issues, policy
Methods	particcipant observation focuss groups, surveys intervviews, literature + documment review	similar but scaled to limits of class	same as for ethnography
Confidentiality	absolllute	partial	may be none
Tools	videoo + still camera Tapee recorder logs, j journals, histonrical documents mapss, researcher	scaled to limits of teacher and class researcher	same as for ethnography researcher
Subjects	"inforrmants" – people In thee culture	same, but more likely to be students and teacher	informants in the school + its community
Level of Analysis	analyysis	description/ analysis	analysis required for action
Audience/ Communication	acaddemic writing + meetitings, college + graduuate classes	teacher + students colleagues newsletters	community + school, legislators media, education Journals,courts
Outcomes	undeerstanding of educcational practice proceess	improvement in practice	change in practice and policy; greater involvement of community
Examples	Georrge and Louise Spinodler's work		East. St. Louis Action Research
Cautions	inappppropriate methhod for research quesstion, poor data collecction + analysis reseaarcher bias	same	same warping data disappointment if "action" fails

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This is a "work in progress" and, therefore, not ready for publication or citation. I invite your comments and suggestions.

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